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SAVOIR-FAIRE

ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE
IN CLASSICAL AFRICAN ART

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by Bruno Claessens

With the exhibition “Savoir-Faire”, Duende Art Projects presents a curated selection of antique African artworks exemplifying the outstanding technical skills of the artists who created them. These skills encompass a range of abilities, such as the mastery of materials, techniques, and craftsmanship. “Savoir-faire” is a French term that translates to “know-how” or “knowing how to do.” It emphasizes not just the knowledge of artistic principles but also the ability to execute them effectively and skillfully. Evaluating an artist’s “savoir-faire” helps assess their technical abilities and understand how these contribute to the overall quality and impact of their artwork. The concept of “savoir-faire” thus acknowledges the importance of an artist’s technical competence. Furthermore, “savoir-faire” encompasses the understanding of a culture’s artistic conventions and the sculptor’s ability to utilize or subvert them deliberately. Artists who demonstrate a strong “savoir-faire” are not bound by technical limitations but instead use their mastery to push boundaries, innovate, and create unique artworks. When talking about art collecting itself, “savoir-faire”

can also be applied; It refers to the knowledge, expertise, and skill it takes to build a collection. It implies a deep understanding of art, including its historical and cultural context, and the ability to recognize and acquire quality artworks. For an art collector, the expression can encompass different aspects: an individual with “savoir-faire” invests time and effort in researching and studying art. This knowledge enables him or her to make informed decisions when acquiring artworks and to appreciate the significance and value of the pieces in their collection. Secondly, “Savoir-faire” in collecting involves having a discerning eye and a refined aesthetic sense. Collectors identify artworks that possess exceptional artistic merit, originality, and cultural significance. They can appreciate the nuances of different styles, mediums, and techniques, which helps them curate a cohesive and compelling collection.

“Savoir-faire” thus highlights the expertise and passion for art of a collector, while for Duende Art Projects it addresses its role in facilitating the exchange and appreciation of African art.



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STOOL

Anonymous Chokwe artist
"The Master of the Blocky Feet"
Angola, Early 20th century
Wood, metal. 24 cm

Provenance
Private Collection, Brasschaat, Belgium, 2010-2023

An important discovery in the corpus of Chokwe art, this beautiful stool has never been published or exhibited before. The delicate facial details of this single-block stool are exceptionally refined and expressive, while its pensive posture gives it a most universal appeal. Carved by a songi or master court sculptor, this stool once expressed the power and prestige of its Chokwe owner. The function of such a stool was not so much that of an elaborate piece of furniture or status symbol, but rather that of an insignia of authority advocating order and speaking of supreme political and spiritual power. When referring to a carved stool that belonged to a chief, headman or important elder, the Chokwe term *ngunja* ('throne') was used to express proper respect for the influential rank of its owner. The figure

of the female caryatid carved in the stool symbolically supports the king, metaphorical protecting his authority. Also literally bearing the chief, this female ancestor underlines her support to his political power.

A Chokwe stool sculpted by the same artist is held by the Belgian Royal Museum for Central Africa (EO.1948.40.29). Its facial features are rendered in a most similar manner, as is the posture of its body – just as a second stool from this hand which was offered for sale at Sotheby Parke Bernet in New York on 6 March 1980 (lot 141). An identical 'wave-shaped' scarification pattern can be found on its left hip, while copper bracelets also decorate the wrists. A stool once owned by the French artist Arman (1928-2005),





published in "African Faces, African Figures. The Arman Collection" (New York, The Museum of African Art, 1997, no. 155) also can be attributed to this anonymous Chokwe artist. A similar vertical zig-zag scarification line is sculpted under the eyes, and the feet are sculpted in an identical blocky rectangular manner. Four other seated Chokwe stools of this type, yet possibly from different artists can be cited. One, previous in the collection of Max Fleisher, published in "African Art in American Collections", Washington, 1989, p. 394, #1003), a second in the Darteville Collection (published in Neyt (François), "Fleuve Congo. Arts d'Afrique centrale", Paris, Musée du quai Branly, 2010, p. 353, #237); and a third, since 1927 in the collection of the Bernisches Historisches Museum in Switzerland

[CO.659], published in "African Seats", New York, Prestel, 1995, p. 148 & 184, #106. The latter displays very similar scarification patterns on the body, and an equally refined coiffure; it shows how copper alloy earrings must also once have decorated the present stool. More naturalistic but also displaying a female caryatid is an example in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1978.412.545), the lower and upper rim decorated with imported brass tacks, sparsely applied to the back of the coiffure of the present - the use of the metal was the prerogative of Chokwe royalty. This beautiful stool must once have been an important source of prestige to its owner and remains a testament of the outstanding craftsmanship of Angola's Chokwe sculptors.



From left to right: Arman Collection. Bern Museum. Darteville Collection.



From left to right: Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, 6 March 1980. Lot 141
Fleisher Collection, Tervuren (EO.1948.40.29).



PRESTIGE SPOON

Anonymous Dan artist
Ivory Coast, Early 20th century
Wood. 41 cm

Provenance

Collection Max Rouayroux, Nice, France
Rouayroux family collection, France, -2016
Binoche & Giquello, Paris, 19 May 2016, lot 35.
Private Collection, Germany, 2016-2023

Publication

"La rencontre du ciel et de la terre", Cannes: Ville
de Cannes/Z'édicions, 1990, p. 15, #21
Peres, Javier, "WILD STYLE: Exhibition of
Figurative Art", Milan, Skira, 2016

Exhibition

"La rencontre du ciel et de la terre",
Musée de la Castre, Cannes, France, 1990
"WILD STYLE: Exhibition of Figurative Art", Peres
Projects, Berlin, 10 June – 5 August 2016





Dan *wunkirle* photographed by Hans Himmelheber.
 Photo source: de Grunne, Bernard, "Dan, Dancing
 with spoons", Brussels, 2019, p. 17 & p. 29



Alberto Giacometti's "Spoon Woman" (1927) on view at the Orangerie des Tuileries in Paris in 1969. Exhibited frequently in museums in Paris during the 1920s, Dan spoons were of immense interest to European artists, such as Alberto Giacometti, who appreciated their geometry, their literal rendering of bodily volumes, and the alternatives they presented to Western modes of modeling and carving. They were a direct inspiration for his famous 1927 bronze sculpture "Spoon Woman". Image courtesy of Foundation Giacometti, Paris.

Ivory Coast's Dan culture is famous for its beautifully sculpted figurative spoons; known as *wakemia* or *wunkirmian*, which literally means 'feast ladle'. Such large ceremonial spoons were the status symbol and prized possession of the *wunkirle* or *wakede*; the most hospitable woman of each town quarter. The *wunkirle* gained her reputation through her generosity, with the most recognition garnered through the hospitality shown to visiting strangers. Several obligations and responsibilities came with the honor of this prestigious title. Within her household the *wunkirle* was responsible for the management of the food supplies of the entire family. She offered food and shelter to visitors and invited travelling dance groups and musicians to her home. The *wakede* supplied food to the participants of the circumcision camp and during planting time she prepared the meals for the men clearing the fields. In order to be able to fulfill this myriad of duties, the *wunkirle* and her husband had to enjoy a certain prosperity by being successful and industrious farmers.

These wooden spoons mainly served as ceremonial dance wands. During feasts each *wakede* carried her spoon through town dancing and scattering raw rice, peanuts and occasionally coins or candy. She was accompanied by other women from her quarter who played on bamboo slit drums or carried pots of

boiled rice and soup. The *wakede* used her spoon to divide the food amongst the guests, or rather, indicated the desired distribution with it. During these festivals the different *wunkirlone* of the village competed in generosity. Visiting guests judged which *wunkirle* was the most generous. This performance of all *wakede* and their crews was a spectacular gathering and celebration of the importance of the female role within society. When a *wunkirle* became too old, she would choose her successor among the married women of her village quarter.

As the Dan were a patrilocal society, with wives usually coming from other villages, the spoon would not be passed on to her own daughter. Dan sculptors created a wide range of *wunkirmian*. Depiction of legs such as are on the present spoon are not the most common anthropomorphic feature carved as a ladle's handle: more frequent are handles representing the likeness of a human head. The bowl of the ladle represents the torso and forms a wonderful surrealist interpretation of the human body. This specific type of Dan spoons is called *megalumia*, or 'legged wooden spoon' and most likely represents the *wunkirle*. This beautiful example of the Rouayroux collection sets itself apart within the corpus by its beautiful proportions, the roundness of its scoop, the elegant transition between body and bowl, and the depth of its patina.

SICKNESS MASK

Anonymous Pende artist
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
19 x 12 x 11 cm
Wood

Provenance
Collection David Henrion, Brussels
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2022





The mask (known locally as *Mbangu*) represents a face distorted by a paralysis of the facial nerve. The black-and-white division of the mask's face evokes the scars of someone who fell into the fire during an epileptic attack. Indeed, scientists have demonstrated that the flickering flames of night-time campfires are proven triggers for seizures. However, the scars associated with epilepsy are only one of its symptoms. As you can see on the below field-photo, the masked performer would also wear a humpback. The multiplication of complaints indicated that *Mbangu* did not represent just one illness. Instead, the sculptor and performer collaborated to make *Mbangu* a composite sign for illness and disability, of all the misfortunes that might befall someone.

The black-and-white coloration deserves further comment. Color symbolism in Pende masks is usually positional. While white can have several meanings, the most common one comes through its association with the white kaolin clay used in healing rites. On the other hand, black is the color of sorcery and illness. Therefore, the bicolouration may have had a secondary meaning in situating *Mbangu* at the crossroads between healing and illness. From its profile views, the mask seems either completely black or white - an

accidental reference to the eastern yin-yang symbol - in line with the masks' universal appeal.

In line with Pende physiognomic theory, *Mbangu* displays several masculine features: the assertive forward-projecting forehead, the well-articulated cheekbones, and the downcast projecting eyes. Facing the challenge of chronic disability, *Mbangu* is also facing the challenge of bitterness and envy. The artist has gone far beyond the naturalistic representation of a physical complaint to comment on the toll of chronic illness on the psyche. This mask conveys an extraordinary delicacy by contrasting the gentle perfection of the features with their systematic distortion. The sculptor responds to the widespread version of *Mbangu's* song: 'Do not mock your neighbour, do not laugh at your brother. The sorcerers have bewitched him'. In other words, anyone may fall prey to misfortune. It could happen to you.

If you thought this mask looked familiar, it might be because you recall its deformed face from the head of one of the women displayed on Picasso's masterpiece 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (1907). Indeed the artist became heavily influenced by African masks during the painting of this seminal work.

Pende "mbangu" masquerade. Note the arrow piercing the masker's humpback. (Photo by Zoe S. Strother, 1989. Published in Strother (Zoë S.), "Pende", Milan, 5 Continents, 2008:52, fig. 9).





FIGURATIVE GRAVE MARKER

Anonymous Zaramo artist
Tanzania, 2nd quarter 20th century
Wood. 44 cm

Provenance

Acquired in Tanzania by Alain Dufour, circa 1990.
Galerie 66, Village Suisse, Paris.
Private Collection, Paris





Compared to Western and Central Africa, figurative sculpture is rare to find in Eastern Africa. Before independence, Tanzania's Zaramo people had a long tradition of sculpting full-standing figures crowning grave markers. Living in the eastern coastal region of Tanzania, the Zaramo erected such commemorative graveposts to honor important ancestors. The figures were intended as a remembrance of the deceased for the living. These posts served as useful reminders of the ancestors who were also memorialized and honored in family genealogies, rituals, traditions, and histories long after they had died. This realistically sculpted head crowning this old grave marker likely represents an elder as it portrays a bearded man. His face was carved in a realistic style, representing the individual who was to be commemorated. The plump lips, prominent cheekbones, bulbous eyes, puffy eyelids, domed forehead, and the oversized skull give this piece a timeless character, placing this funerary effigy in the world of the ancestors from where he protects his descendants. About a dozen Zaramo posts crowned by a full-length figure are known, even less only featuring a sculpted head. The naturalistic treatment of the face and the graceful modelling of the different features relates this grave marker to an example formerly in the private collection of the Parisian contemporary art dealers Liliane and

Michel Durand-Dessert. Especially the rendering of the cheekbones and the treatment of the eyelids and eyes suggest both works were created by the same master sculptor. Imbued with feelings of pride and self-awareness these sculptures somehow remind of ancient Egyptian dynastic wooden figures. The best-known figure in this style is in the collection of Geneva's Barbier-Mueller collection (#1027-59), published and published by Tom Phillips in "Africa. The Art of a Continent" (p. 152, #2.36), and exhibited at London's Royal Academy in 1995. A seated male figure holding its beard, in this similar style, was sold by the Parisian auction house Calmels Cohen in 2004 (10 June 2004, lot 72). In 2006 the same auction house sold a funerary post crowned with a 'mwana hiti' figure formerly in the collection of the Barbier-Mueller collection (4 December 2006, lot 98). Berlin's Ethnological Museum holds three similar grave markers collected in the first decades of the twentieth century (inventory numbers III.E.20113 & III.E.3593 a-c). Post-independence, the ujamaa ideology of President Nyerere resulted in an extensive villagization of Zaramo communities; a resettling which caused many to abandon their traditional grave sites, the markers left to decay. Islamization and urbanization gave a final blow to this ancient tradition of which these beautiful bust remains one of the few remaining witnesses.



From left to right: 1. Collection Musée Barbier-Mueller, Genève, Switzerland (inv. #1027-59). 2. Ex Collection Liliane & Michel Durand-Dessert (Christie's, Paris, 27 June 2018, lot 102).





Zaramo grave post in situ photographed by Diane Pelrine (photo published in Roy (Christopher D.), "Kilengi. Afrikanische Kunst aus der sammlung Bareiss", Munich, 1997). Note the similar eye morphology.



DRINKING CUP

The Wongo Master of the Pursued Horizontal Lips
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
Wood. 15 cm

Provenance

Hélène Leloup, Paris, France, 1991
Prof. Boris Magasanik, Cambridge, USA
By descent through family, -2014
Private Collection, Antwerp, Belgium, 2014-2023

A cup carved in the form of a hollowed human head on top of a narrowed neck complete with an Adam's apple beneath a face shaped with pursed lips, rising nose and slit eyes originates from Congo's Wongo peoples, part of the Kuba cultural realm. Ornate cups of this type were carved for titled individuals such as princes, chiefs, and other dignitaries. Palm wine, obtained from the raffia palm tree was the most popular beverage consumed in the Kuba region. While any adult male has his personal cup, only the upper echelons of society could commission anthropomorphic examples from crafted sculptors. Such elaborate carved cups established the title and refinement of the owner, serving as display pieces as well as functional objects. Just as the Medici and the Dukes of Burgundy, Kuba royalty were eager to surround themselves with a host of artists.

The Kuba empire comprised more than seventeen distinct ethnic groups united under the leadership of the Nyimi, or king. These various Kuba subgroups were distinguished on the basis of their origins and languages, yet they all shared the appreciation of works produced by their skilled artists. Many of the finest known carvings were created by Wongo sculptors and traded to the Kuba proper, who lived to the east of them. The present cup can be positively attributed to a Wongo artist on the basis of stylistic criteria. Especially the abundance of keloid scarifications on the forehead and cheeks, as well as

the large protruding circular motifs on the temple are hallmark characteristics of Wongo anthropomorphic sculpture.

While the identity of the creators of these exquisite drinking vessels hasn't been recorded, stylistic similarities make it possible to discover anonymous masters. Active at the turn of the twentieth century, we have chosen to nickname the artist of the present cup, "The Wongo Master of the Pursed Horizontal Lips", inspired by one of the identifying signature iconographic elements of his anthropomorphic cups that set him apart from other Wongo sculptors. Several cups of this master carver were collected between 1907 and 1909 by Hungarian anthropologist Emil Torday and currently held by the British Museum.

This sculptor is especially known from a group of exquisite drinking vessels shaped as figures, standing on short legs set apart, arms akimbo, the head and body providing a waisted cup. Jan Vansina, a Belgian anthropologist who documented the history of the Kuba, wrote about one of these: "this cup represents a woman of rank wearing jewelry on her arms and abundantly scarified. Any Kuba sees immediately that the patterns shown on the torso and abdomen are ambiguous. They are part of those that appear on women's bodies among central Kuba, but untypical of that style. The patterns also belong to the style used for decorating wooden objects. The ambiguity points





Group of Kuba men drinking palm wine photographed by Leo Viktor Frobenius (1873-1938) (Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt (EBA-B 00060-b). The terracotta vessel in front held the palm wine; beside it we can spot a wooden cup, while the other men seem to be using glass and metal drinking vessels.

to a visual pun, reminiscent of Magritte: "This object is not a women, it is a cup." The Kuba delighted in visual puns and double entendre."

"The Wongo Master of the Pursued Horizontal Lips" in all likelihood was associated with the Wongo court seen the number of identified examples. The sovereign probably distributed cups to his vassals and the few visiting European explorers. His signature style also made school as several cups bear close resemblance yet differ on important details, especially the mouth. While the facial scarifications might be individualized on every cup, it is especially the shape of the lips - pursed, narrow and elongated horizontally - that identify the hand of our master carver. Circular incisions decorating the base and upper ridge of the vessel are a second stylistic signature, as is the specific shape of the triangular nose. Besides the British Museum, also the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren holds cups by this talented sculptor, as does the Fowler Museum, the Buffalo Museum of Science, and the Penn Museum. A cup in the Berlin museum might be carved by an artist working in the immediate environment of our sculptor. A double cup is held by the Brooklyn Museum and several head-shaped examples are in various private collections. It should be noted that most of these cups left Congo before 1920, establishing the active career of the anonymous artist around 1890-1910.



Kuba man with facial scarifications
photographed by Jacques Delay.



Collection Brooklyn Museum, New York, NY, USA (22.1488)

Top left: Collection British Museum, London, UK (Af1910,0420.10). Collected by Emil Torday between 1905-1908. Top right: Collection Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium (EO.0.0.2555-3). Bottom left: Private Collection. Collected before 1927. Published in: De Quay-Lombrail, Paris, 11 October 1996. Lot 7. Bottom right: Private Collection. Published in: Olbrechts (Frans M.), "Plastiek van Kongo", Antwerp/Brussel/Gent/Leuven: Standaard Boekhandel, 1946 = "Les Arts Plastiques du Congo belge", Brussels: Erasme, 1959: PL.XV, no.74



Top left: Collection British Museum, London, UK (Af1954,23.1894). Ex Wellcome collection, before 1930. **Top right:** Collection Carl(1889-1961) & Amalie(1891-1968) Kjersmeier, Copenhagen, Denmark. Acquired in 1925. Published in: Kjersmeier (Carl), "Afrikanske Negerskulpturer/African Negro Sculptures", Copenhagen: Fischers, 1947, p. 69. **Bottom left:** Collection Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium (EO.0.0.19368). Acquired in 1914. **Bottom right:** Collection Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA (X65.3763)

Top left: Collection Penn Museum, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, PA, USA (AF 1943). Acquired from Emil Torday in 1913. **Top right:** Collection The Buffalo Museum of Science, Buffalo, NY., USA (C15571). **Bottom left:** Private Collection. Published in: Sotheby's, Paris, "Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie", 12 December 2012. Lot 2. Collected between 1906 and 1914 by Émile Lejeune (1883-1920). **Bottom right:** Collection Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium (EO.0.0.17354). Acquired in 1914.



COLON FIGURE

Anonymous Vili artist
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
Wood. 22,5 cm

Provenance

Collected in situ by Fernand Oliveda,
French administrator, between 1906 and 1929
Rouillac, Hôtel des Ventes de Vendôme, 16 May 2023. Lot 12.
Rob Temple, Ghent, Belgium, 2023
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023





Postcard of a Loango market stall with Vili art for sale, ca. 1910. A perfect example to show how early on objects were intentionally carved for passing tourists, the above postcard from around 1910, shows a Loango market stall with Kongo and Vili-inspired masks and figures made for sale. Already from the 2nd quarter of the 19th century the Northwestern Kongo people produced decorative art (some of it derived from ritual art) for export, alongside ritual and decorative art for their own use. By the end of the 19th century making art for outsiders had become an additional source of income for Vili artists and during the first half of the 20th century, making art for colonials was their main occupation because traditional clients had almost disappeared.

MONKEY FIGURE

Anonymous Vili artist
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
Wood. 18 cm

Provenance

Collected in situ by Fernand Oliveda,
French administrator, between 1906 and 1929
Rouillac, Hôtel des Ventes de Vendôme, 16 May 2023. Lot 13.
Rob Temple, Ghent, Belgium, 2023
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023





The Vili, living on the Congolese Loango Coast, materialized supernatural powers in wooden monkey statues that served to protect their owners. A special type of nkisi or power figure, these statues were meant to protect a chief against sorcery. Vili chiefs were particularly subject to the maleficent actions of sorcerers and witches, against which such figures may have provided protection. As the Vili feared primates, the monkey iconography would make the nkisi even more fearsome and effective. A nkisi gained power through the hands of a ritual expert, the nganga, who placed a spiritual force into the figure by inserting specific substances or attaching them through boxes or horns. Depending on the function of the nkisi, the nganga would select vegetal, mineral, and animal elements for their symbolic connotations. Such paraphernalia could include small fragments of monkeys, as the Vili assigned specific symbolic meaning to

certain monkey species. For example, the kinkanda monkey was strong at resisting death, while the nsengi monkey stole food with exceptional malice and discovered people's secrets by spying on their dreams. Less than a dozen Vili monkey figures are known: one in the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal (185-2), one in the Leiden Museum (497-89; acquired in 1884), two in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig (MAf 4193 & MAf 5548), a few in private collections, and one in the Musée du quai Branly (71.1886.80.34), seated and eating a fruit, it was already acquired from Joseph Cholet in 1886, indicating the old age of this sculptural tradition. The latter, just as the Oliveda monkey shows no signs of ritual usage, its red-black polychromy still in a pristine condition. The Oliveda monkey is the only known example sculpted together with a snake, held by the left hand, while biting the left leg – perhaps explaining the surprised look of the monkey!





FEMALE SPIRIT SPOUSE FIGURE

Anonymous Baule artist
Ivory Coast, Early 20th century
Wood. 33 cm

Provenance

Private Collection, 1978
Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer, Munich, 6 May 1978. Lot 157.
Private Collection, 1979
Christie's, London, "Tribal Art", 3 April 1979. Lot 145.
Arcade Gallery/Wengraf, London, UK, 1979
Private collection, Belgium, 2011
Bernaerts, Antwerp, 20 October 2011. Lot 62.
Private Collection, Antwerp, Belgium

Publication

Claessens (Bruno) & Danis (Jean-Louis), "Baule Monkeys",
Brussels, Fonds Mercator, 2016, p. 114, fig.70

A 'wife from the other world' (*blolo bla*). Every Baule lived with such a spirit spouse; his was *blolo bla*, hers *blolobian* (male). When diviners suspected the spirit spouse of causing personal problems (often sexual), the affected individual had to commission a statue for the jealous spirit. That figure needed to be beautiful to avoid further offence; hence, the classic ideal of Baule beauty of these statues: smooth skin; long neck; sophisticated coiffure; raised scarifications on the temples, the neck, the back and the chest; and a torso well-proportioned to the muscular calves and buttocks. Although similar in facture, statues of spirit spouses are generally smaller than those of the equally anthropomorphic *asye usu*, owned by Baule diviners.







MALE SPIRIT SPOUSE FIGURE

Anonymous Baule artist
Ivory Coast, Early 20th century
Wood, fibers, beads. 40 cm

Provenance
Janine and Josef Gugler Collection, Storrs, USA
Kimballs Auction, Hatfield, 22 February 2023, lot 266.
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023

A 'husband from the other world' (blolo bian). Every Baule lived with such a spirit spouse; his was blolo bla, hers blolo bian. When diviners suspected the spirit spouse of causing personal problems (often sexual), the affected individual had to commission a statue for the jealous spirit. That figure needed to be beautiful to avoid further offence; hence, the classic ideal of Baule beauty of these statues: smooth skin; long neck; sophisticated coiffure; raised scarifications on the temples, the neck, the back and the chest; and a torso well-proportioned to the muscular calves and buttocks. Although similar in facture, statues of spirit spouses are generally smaller than those of the equally anthropomorphic asye usu, owned by Baule diviners.





FIGURE

Anonymous Mumuye artist
Nigeria, Early 20th century
Wood, metal. 66 cm

Provenance

Collected by Jean-Michel Huguenin
Jean-Michel Huguenin / Galerie Majestic, Paris, 1969
Renaud Vanuxem, Paris, France, 2011
Private Collection, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Publication

Vanuxem (Renaud), "Sculptures XI", Paris, 2011





This expressive Mumuye statue was collected by the French art dealer Michel Huguenin at the end of the 1960s. In her book 'Collectors' Visions' (Milan, 2018, p. 167), Christine Valluet wrote about Huguenin's remarkable career. Born in Biarritz in 1929, he set off for Bamako in French Sudan (today's Mali) in 1951, where a trading company had promised him a job. He stayed for ten years, until independence. A bargain hunter collecting antiquarian books from a young age, he discovered Dogon sculpture, which held no interest in expatriates and colonial officers at the time. He immediately put as much fervor into hunting down these objects as he did in unearthing rare books and dropped his ambition to one day run a bookshop. In Bamako he met the publisher François Di Dio, who came there to collect artworks on behalf of René Rasmussen and Pierre Loeb. He also came across various other travellers, including Emil Storrer, Marie-Angie Ciolkowska, and Henri Kamer, leading him to decide to deal in African art too. Through another friend he was able to establish relations with the New York dealer Julius Carlebach, to whom he sold an important shipment of objects from Mali. On his return to France in 1961, Michel opened a shop, initially in Biarritz (Galerie Majestic, from the name of the building where

it was located) for a few months, later relocating to another gallery at 27 rue Guénégaud in Paris. He continued to travel in search of interesting objects with which to stock his gallery and left for Gabon with Philippe Guimiot in 1962, then continuing to Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau alone. Like his Parisian colleagues, he too bought artworks from African dealers such as Mamadou Sylla or Diongassi Almami – traders that had begun to provide artefacts for Paris galleries since the early 1950s.

Michel Huguenin held several very popular exhibitions at Galerie Majestic in Paris. One of the most memorable, being the first in France on the subject, was undoubtedly 'Mumuye', which in 1968 displayed fifteen of the fifty or so statues Michel Huguenin and Edward Klejman bought in Cameroon, in the border zone near Nigeria. The art of the Mumuye was virtually unknown at the time and the only previous exhibition of works by this ethnic group had been organized at the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, by the field ethnologist Mette Bovin in 1965. In 1969, Philippe Guimiot would also bring back a group of Mumuye statuary to Paris, which he sold mostly to Jacques Kerchache, who also became an important promoter of the art of this region.





FIGURE

Anonymous Mumuye artist

Nigeria, Early 20th century

Wood. 53 cm

Provenance

Acquired by Philippe Guimiot in Duala,

Cameroon, 1968-1969 (P.G.-57)

Possibly Jacques Kerchache, Paris, France

Private Collection, Sweden

Stockholms Auktionsverk, Stockholm, 31 May 2023, lot 2817418

Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023

The statues of the Mumuye are one of the most innovative sculptural traditions from Nigeria's Benue River Valley. The elegance of their elongated torsos embodies a quality of dynamism through a slight asymmetry. This striking inherent sense of motion gives them a most contemporary feeling. Mumuye artists' abstract interpretation of the human body does recall the approach to anatomy by artists of the Cubist and Expressionist movements. The high degree of stylistic diversity, testifying to their makers' creativity and inventiveness, is paralleled by the variety of their ritual functions. Ethnologists who have studied Mumuye figures since the middle of the 20th century report the multiple roles they could fulfill. Used by healers and diviners, they could have a therapeutic or divinatory function. In the possession of an important male elder, they would reinforce his status and prestige within a community. One figure could have several functions and a particular function cannot be correlated with size, style or other formal attributes. What remains are their sweeping volumes that continue to inspire.





MAMMY WATA HEADDRESS

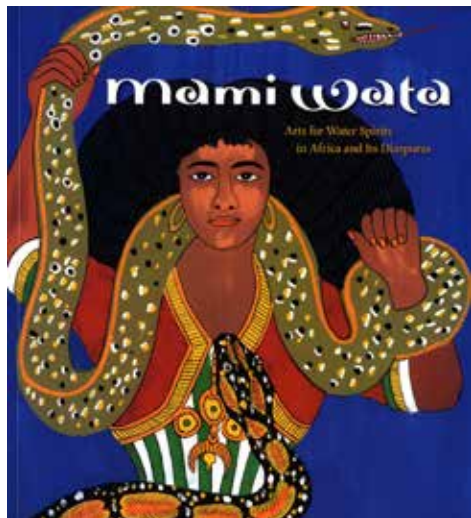
Akpan Chukwu of Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak
(Annang peoples) or another member of the Chukwu family
Nigeria, Mid 20th century
Wood, fibers. 82 cm

Provenance

Private Collection, Côtes d'Armor, France
Karl Benz, Plérin, 7 July 2023, lot 329
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023







Art's inspiration easily crosses borders, across space and time, the present exceptional 'Mami Wata' headdress being a perfect example. For too long African material cultures have been considered as closed systems without any outside influences; yet the origin of their inspirations, as we will see, can go way beyond the usual. 'Mami Wata' is such a unique pan-African phenomenon with a long and global history. The artist who carved this magnificent Ibibo headdress from Nigeria was inspired by a then 50-year-old German postcard of an Indian snake charmer active in Hamburg and abroad in the 1890s. The iconography struck a chord and was explicitly copied in a syncretic iconographic style, blending Ibibo stylistic elements with the outside influence. The theme of Mami Wata, appears in myriad forms, including mermaid and snake charmers, with varying devotional practices through

sub-Saharan Africa. Henry John Drewal's 2008 publication "Mami Wata – Arts for Water Spirits in African and Its Diaspora", coinciding with an exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA in Los Angeles, gives an excellent overview of this phenomenon.

'Mami Wata', which can be translated as 'Mother Water', is in fact pidgin English. She is said to bring good fortune in the form of money. Her powers, however, extend far beyond economic gain. Although for some she indeed bestows good fortune and statues through monetary wealth, for others, she aids in concerns related to procreation (infertility, impotence, or infant mortality). Mami Wata also provided a spiritual and professional avenue for women to become priestesses and healers of both psycho-spiritual and physical ailments and to assert female agency in a generally male-dominated societies. Henry Drewal called her a multivocal, multifocal symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances: nurturing mother; sexy mama; provider of riches; healer of physical and spiritual ills; embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. People were attracted to the seemingly limitless possibilities she represents, and at the same time frightened by her destructive potential. She inspired a vast array of emotions, attitudes, and actions among those who worshipped her, those

who fear her, those who study her, and those who create works of art about her. What the Yoruba people say about their culture is also applicable to the histories and significances of Mami Wata: she is like 'a river that never ends'. (op. cit., p. 25).

The story of this sculpture starts in Hamburg, Germany. The West has had a long and enduring fascination with the 'exotic'. By the second half of the nineteenth century, this interest had spread beyond the European upper classes to a much wider audience. Institutions such as botanical and zoological gardens, ethnographic museums, and circuses and 'people shows' provided opportunities to come in touch with the exotic and bizarre. One of the most significant centers for these developments was the northern German port and trading center of Hamburg, which was in many ways Europe's gateway to the exotic. It was an important member and leader of the Hanseatic League, a group of wealthy independent city-states on the North Sea that developed powerful import/export companies with vessels that plied the world's oceans. Hamburg's contacts with distant lands fed the popular European appetite for things foreign. While illustrated accounts of adventures abroad proliferated in books, magazines, and newspapers, the exotic became tangible as a growing number of African, Asian, and Indian sailors appeared in the port of Hamburg and other maritime centers. (op.cit., pp. 49-50).





Niger River Delta water spirit
headdress that was photographed
by J. A. Green in the Delta town of
Bonny in 1901



Carl. G. C. Hagenbeck worked as a fish merchant in St. Pauli in the port area of Hamburg. This area was also a popular entertainment center for sailors and others. In 1848, a fisherman who worked the Artic waters brought some sea lions to Hagenbeck, which he in turn exhibited as a zoological attraction. The immediate success of this venture led to a rapidly enlarged menagerie of exotic animals from Greenland, Africa, and Asia. Sensing the public's enormous appetite for the bizarre, Hagenbeck decided to expand his imports to include another curiosity: exotic people. The first of these arrived in 1875, a family of Laplanders, who had accompanied a shipment of reindeer. This was the modest beginning of a new concept in popular entertainment known as the 'Völkershauen', or 'people shows'. In order to advertise his new attractions, Hagenbeck turned

to Adolph Friedländer, a leading printer who quickly began to produce a large corpus of inexpensive color posters for Hagenbeck, whose most extravagant spectacle was doubtless his 'International Circus And Ceylonese Caravan', seventy artists, craftspeople, jugglers, magicians, and musicians together with many wild animals. A caravan that was witnessed by over a million people within a six-week period.

Hagenbeck hired a famous hunter named Breitwiser to travel to Southeast Asia and the Pacific to collect rare snakes, insects, and butterflies. In addition to these, Breitwiser, brought back a wife, who under the stage name 'Maladamatjaute' began to perform as a snake charmer in Hagenbeck's production. A Hamburg studio photography taken about 1887 shows Maladamatjaute attired for her

performance. The style and cut of her bodice, the stripes made of buttons, the coins about her waist, the armlets, the position of the snake around her neck and a second one nearby, the nonfunctional bifurcated flute held in her hand, and her facial features and coiffure: all duplicate those seen in a snake charmer chromolithograph from the Friedländer lithographic company, the original of which has not yet been found. What we do have, however, is a reprint, made in 1955 in Bombay, India, by the Shree Ram Calendar Company from an original sent to them by two merchants in Kumase, Ghana. There can be little doubt, therefore, that Maladamatjaute was the model for the image. Her light brown skin placed her beyond Europe, while the boldness of her gaze and the strangeness of her occupation epitomized for Europeans her 'otherness' and the

mystery and wonder of the 'Orient'. As Maladamatjaute's fame as a snake charmer spread, her image began to appear in circus flyers and show posters for the Folies Bergères in Paris, as well as in the United States. Soon after, and probably unknown to Maladamatjaute, her image spread to Africa – but for very different reasons and imbued with very new meanings. (op. cit., pp. 50-52). In the nearly one hundred years since the arrival of the snake charmer print in Africa (and especially after twelve thousand copies were printed in Bombay, India, in 1955, and sent to traders in Kumase, Ghana), the image has traveled widely, first in West and subsequently in Central Africa. Various copies of copies continue to circulate widely in sub-Saharan Africa, where, as of 2005, Henry Drewal discerned the influence of the print in at least fifty cultures in twenty countries! (op.cit., p.54).

Mammy Wata commissioned by Jill Salmons for Pamela J. Brink from Thomas Chukwu in 1975. Collection of the University of Iowa Museum of Art (#1991.225)

Not long after its publication in Europe, the snake charmer chromolithograph reached West Africa, probably carried by African sailors who had seen it in Hamburg. European merchants stationed in Africa, whether Germans or others, may have also brought Maladamatjaute's seductive image to decorate their work or domestic spaces. For African viewers, the snake charmer's light brown skin and long black wavy hair suggested that she came from beyond Africa, and the print had a dramatic and almost immediate impact. By 1901, about fifteen years after its appearance in Hamburg, the snake charmer image had already been interpreted as an African water spirit, translated into a three-dimensional carved image, and incorporated into a Niger River Delta water spirit headdress that was photographed by J. A. Green in the Delta town of Bonny. The

headdress clearly shows the inspiration of the Hamburg print. The image of Maladamatjaute, the 'Hindoo' snake charmer of European renown, had begun a new life as the primary icon for Mami Wata, an African water divinity with overseas origins. The snake, an important and widespread African symbol of water was a most appropriate subject to be shown surrounding, protecting, and being controlled by Mami Wata. Golder armlets, earrings, neckline, pendant, and waist ornaments in the print combined to evoke the riches that Mami Wata promises to those who honor her. This theme of wealth that underlies much of Mami Wata worship is sometimes exaggerated in her sculpted images, as in the present Ibibio sculpture. (op. cit., pp. 52-53)

In the 1930s and 1940s, Kenneth Murray, the first surveyor of the





These figures are grouped to demonstrate the carving sequence followed by Akpan Chukwu and other members of his family. They were carved by Akpan Akpan Chukwu, son of the famous Annang carver Akpan Chukwu, and commissioned by the Oron Museum. Collection Oron Museum, Nigeria. Photographed by Jill Salmons, 1976.

Nigerian Department of Antiquities, made an exhaustive survey of the arts of southeastern Nigeria. While noting the decline in carving among many Ibibio groups, largely due to intense Christian missionary activity, he remarked that the Annang continued to produce a wealth of carvings and supplied them to neighboring groups. A number of carvers lived in the important Annang trading center of Utu Etim Ekpo and sold their works from home. Murray mentioned only one 'Mammy Wata' carving, however, produced by Utu Etim Ekpo's most famous carver, Akpan Chukwu. In 1944 Chukwu showed Murray a life-sized, seated, clothed Mammy Wata holding snakes, which had been commissioned by the people of Degema nearly 130 kilometers away.

Although Akpan died in 1952, his brother Joseph informed Jill Salmons in 1975 that Akpan was first shown the German snake charmer print when a

British District Officer (possibly G. F. Hodgson) commissioned a carved a representation of it from him around 1909. Akpan later elaborated the theme of Mammy Wata, creating a wide variety of forms that could be used in a number of contexts and sold to many different groups. He was often asked to produce unusual or spectacular carvings to amuse audiences, and he may well have carved the kinetic life-sized 'Marmee Wata' that American anthropologist John Messenger observed in the 1950s being used by a local Ekong group: 'The figure whose bewildering movements climaxes the Ekong performance represents the female fertility spirit who resides in a number of abodes including shrines, ant hills, and streams. In this context, she is portrayed as river nnem (spirit) with a python wrapped around her arms, waist and neck, and she is known as 'Marmee Water' ('mother eka in the water'). [op. cit., p. 121]

The completed Mammy Wata sculpture by Akpan Akpan Chukwu. Collection Oron Museum, Nigeria. Photographed by Jill Salmons, 1976.

Working in southeast Nigeria during the first two decades of the twentieth century, English District Officer P. Z. Talbot and his wife, Dorothy, provided the first clues to the importance of Mammy Wata in the pre-Christian beliefs of Ibibio peoples. The Talbots described how Eka Abassi, Mother of God, was central to fertility and lived in water, protecting people while they bathed, washed clothes, or fished. Young girls were led to a pool or stream to receive her blessing before undergoing the ritual period of education and 'fattening' that preceded marriage. Also known as Nnem Mmo (literally 'water spirit'), Eka Abassi could assume the appearance of a crocodile that was sometimes escorted by leopards, pythons, or huge fish. Neither of the Talbots, however, mentioned a carved representation of the spirit, nor does she appear to have been called 'Mammy Wata' at this time – as observed by John Messenger in the 1950s. His research suggests that by that time Mammy Wata had become the popular name for Eka Abassi / Nnem Mmo. It would appear that by the 1940s the newly introduced carved representation of Mammy Wata, based on the snake charmer print, served to gel previously diffuse visual representations of Eka Abassi and was preferred by the diviners for placement in her shrines. In opposition to the zeal of various missionary groups in the area, the belief in Mammy Wata and

her powers acquired an almost cult like status by the 1970s with many Mammy Wata shrines being built. (op. cit., p. 117 & p. 121).

Although Mammy Wata could bestow great riches, she could also wreak havoc according to her whim. She could possess men and women and lure them to her watery kingdom while they were bathing or entice them to follow her through fantastic dreams. Her devotees might take on an otherworldly appearance and behave strangely. While they could become wealthy, they would be unable to bear children, a decided disadvantage in a culture that prizes fecundity. Some people, however, reveled in their communication with the spirit and became Mammy Wata priests or priestesses in their own right. Great wealth and prestige could accrue to priests and priestesses from creating private 'hospitals' where impotent men, barren women, and those suffering from mental problems would pay high fees to be treated using various modalities, including drugs and lengthy counseling sessions. Furthermore, traditional Ibibio society is male dominated, and the ability of a woman to be possessed by Mami Wata, and become a priestess, offered her a unique opportunity to achieve a status in the community equivalent to that accorded to men. (op. cit., pp. 122-123).





Mammy Wata group in a canoe, carved by Joseph Chukwu. Collection Oron Museum, Nigeria. Photographed by Jill Salmons in October 1976.

The commissioning of carvings for these many Mammy Wata adherents explains their prevalence in the 1970s. Members of the Chukwu family, who produced many such carvings, perpetuated Akpan's unusual carpentry style of using precise measurements to carve individual segments of the sculpture, which were then nailed together. The typical hair covering for the Mammy Wata figure was made from the dried fibers from a plantain stem. Keith Murray wrote of the Mami Wata sculpture by Akpan Chukwu: 'He did not properly understand the print which had a subsidiary picture of the snake charmer in a small inset. Hence in his figures of Mammy Wata there is a curious excrescence on one side which actually represents the small inset picture on the print'. Akpan's son, Akpan Akpan Chukwu, who was taught to carve by his father, still portrays this very strange 'excrescence' that represents the original inset picture. The statue Akpan showed Murray in 1944 was a life-

sized, seated, clothed female Mammy Wata, while his brother Joseph and son Akpan Akpan carved many varieties of Mammy Wata in different sizes and poses: seated, standing, or travelling in a canoe flanked by paddlers. Joseph told Jill Salmons that because the carving of Mammy Wata was a complex piece of work, involving various carved segments that have to be joined, apprentices were often taught how to make the less complicated sections, for example, the pieces of snake that wind around the spirit's body. The master carver would instruct his apprentices over the carving of these small units, while he himself made the central trunk and head of the figure. Joseph was taught in this way by his brother and at that time still used the same proportions that his brother originally showed him, which are carefully worked out in pencil on the wood before carving. (Salmons, Jill, "Mammy Wata", *African Arts*, Vol. 10, No. 3, April 1977, p. 13).

In the olden days, a carver would generally be invited to work for a period of time in one village, carving all the necessary masks and figures required by the various cult groups and individuals in the village. He could also be commissioned to make certain sculptures in his own home. On completing commissioned works, Akpan Chukwu would send small boys to deliver them. Before setting out with a Mammy Wata carving, however, the boys would be given twelve to fifteen eggs; before they crossed a stream, they had to throw an egg into the water to appease the water spirit so that they could cross safely. Once the carving was delivered, the boys would be given a white cock, in addition to the financial payment, to take back to the carver. Chukwu would sacrifice the cock on his own carving shrine, for it was believed that unless he did this, the owner of the carving would not be able to satisfy the future demands of the Mammy Wata spirit. In Akpan Chukwu's compound, Jill Salmons

once witnessed eight identical Mammy Wata carvings. Salmons presumed that he had made them for traders in Ikot Ekpene, to be sold to tourists, but Chukwu informed her that in fact they had all been ordered by one diviner. The carver explained that only one was for the diviner's personal use; the other seven were for people 'worried' by the spirit and who had gone to the diviner for advice on having their own shrines. Being Christians, they couldn't erect shrines in their own compounds for fear of repercussions from their churches who expel members known to be maintaining 'pagan' traditions and burn any traditional shrines they come across in their compounds. By keeping their own shrines at the diviner's compound, however, these followers were able to make the necessary sacrifices to the water spirit without incurring the wrath of their fellow Christians. [op. cit., p. 13]



Mammy Wata sculpture ensemble carved by Joseph Chukwu of Utu Etim Ekpo. Collection Jill Salmons, USA.



Mammy Wata figure sculpted by John Onyok (active 1930's-1970's, Urua Akpan. Collectionv Nickl Art Foundation, Kansas City, MO, USA (#20.15.1).

Akpan's genius lay in his ability to grasp new ideas when they were presented to him – as in the case of the Mammy Wata print. A quarter of a century after the death of Akpan Chukwu in 1951, sculptors in the region conveyed to Jill Salmons he was the greatest Annang carver of his time and that he had not yet been surpassed. He had a powerful influence over a wide geographical area for a considerable period of time. Apart from influencing his immediate family and the carving styles around Utu Etim Ekpo, Salmons learned of numerous cases where artistically inclined youths watched Chukwu work when he was employed by villages in Igboland and the Niger Delta. Such youths then continued to carve in their own area after Chukwu had returned home, thus perpetuating his style over a wide area. He was, according to Keith Murray, 'the leader of the modern style of carving, and so was appreciated most by semi-literates who were taken in by his 'realism', fantasy and bright colours, and preferred his carvings to the traditional carvings'. Akpan, according to his brother Joseph, was a larger-than-life character, who always carved with a bottle of imported

gin or whiskey clasped between his knees. It is possible that his incredible popularity as a carver may have led to his death – it is claimed that he was poisoned by a jealous carving relative. It was Chukwu who first introduced the idea of commercializing his art by displaying prepared carvings at the front of his compound to attract passing traders to order from him; the other members of his family followed his example. In 1946, a local newspaper wrote: 'John Chukwu, the owner of the carving venture, marries many women who do the painting after he has finished carving these things'. In the past, women were not allowed to go anywhere near a carver while he worked, the main reason being that they were not supposed to know that masks and figures used by the all-male secret societies were made by mortal hands. Later, possibly through his emancipating influence, carvers' wives and children throughout Annangland helped in the production of carvings. Sons carved the more easily made parts, while women and young children sandpapered and painted the final pieces. (op. cit., p. 15).

In case you were even more curious about the woman who inspired the iconography, Jill Salmons (op. cit., p. 212) was able to reconstruct part of Maladamatjaute's life. As Breitwiser did much of his 'hunting' in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, it seems likely that his wife came from that part of the world, possibly from Samoa or Bornea. Soon after she arrived in Hamburg with Breitwiser, about 1880, she began to perform as a snake charmer in one of Hagenbeck's shows. She may have been taught by Breitwiser, who went by the nickname 'snake gripper'. Within a short time she had become an international attraction, performing in the United States about 1885. A circus newspaper published in Philadelphia in 1885 shows her in a small fenced area surrounded by many snakes and holding aloft two large snakes above her head, while another wraps around her body. Her full head of hair flares outward, parted in the middle, and her name has changed to 'Nala Damajanti – the Empress of the Reptile World – the Greatest and Most Astounding snake charmer of Hindoostan – the bravest of the brave – Python sorceress of mighty power'. She wears a tight bodice, armlets, necklace and hoop

earrings. The circus in questions was that of P. T. Barnum who combined with the Great London Circus and 'the Ethnological Congress of Savage Tribes'. Maladamatjaute also inspired others to become snake charmers according to an article in the *The World* (March/April 1888). Snake charmer, Miss Ida Jeffrey from New York, tells how she 'saw the famous Dama Ajanta, the Hindo girl who charmed snakes here (Madison Square Garden, New York) some years ago. She was tall and lithe and almost as slender as a snake. Maladamadjaute must have travelled widely since she appears in a Folies Bergères poster under the name of 'Nala Damajanti – Charmeuse Hindoue', circa 1890, while also performing for many years in the Adam Forepaugh Circus in the United States. As her fame grew, she continued to perform internationally in Europe and the United States under slightly different stage names. Despite this, the representations of her thick, full head of black wavy hair parted in the middle, and element of her 'Hindoo/Oriental' dress-jewelry, necklace, tight bodice, and hoop earrings remain constant. She and Breitwiser were married for a long time; he lived to ninety-four and died around 1930.





MASK ("NDEEMBA")

Anonymous Yaka artist
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
Wood, pigments, fibers
48 cm

Provenance

Probably acquired from Hans Himmelheber,
who travelled among the Yaka in 1938-39
Kunsthandel Matthias L.J. Lemaire, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands, 1956
Harold & Florence Rome, NY, US, 1956-1987
Sotheby's, New York, 20 May 1987, lot 137
Private Collection, US
Private Collection, Antwerp, Belgium, 2019
Christie's, Paris, 10 April 2019, lot 121.
Private Collection, Belgium, 2019-2023

Publication

"A New Selection of Tribal Art. The African Image", by Plass
(Margaret), The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio, USA, 1959, p. 28, #146
Gillon (Werner), "Collecting African Art", London, 1979, p. 28, #24

Exhibition

"A New Selection of Tribal Art. The African Image",
Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, 1-22 February 1959

Ndeemba Yaka masks are composed of a wooden human face featuring an elaborate fiber coiffure. These were danced by the newly initiated boys at the closing of the *nkhandu* initiation rituals, marking their transition to adult life. The masked dancers would wear a raffia netted shirt with sleeves and pants covering their whole body. The mask's compact oval face itself was once almost completely hidden by fibers to hide the identity of the mask's dancer. A handle at the chin of this mask would be held to secure the mask on the face during energetic dance performances. Unique visual elements (such as the pair of animal horns) were largely left to the sculptor and the expectations of the community. This zoomorphic feature likely refers to the masculinity that was expected from the newly initiated youth. The elongated and upturned nose on the mask alludes to notions of seduction and sexuality – subjects explored during the initiation period. Such an upturned nose is a common feature in much of the Yaka art and has been linked with an elephant's trunk as a symbol of masculine power, an appropriate association for the occasion of

circumcision. While such a nose is said to point to male fertility, the bulbous shape of the eyes is said to reference the moon and therefore female fertility. According to the Yaka specialist Arthur Bourgeois, this *ndeemba* mask can be identified as the *nkaka* type ("grandfather"), which is identified by the facial portion encircled in a frame ("Art of the Yaka and Suku", Paris, 1984, p. 136, cat. 127). A cane frame covered in woven raffia cloth surmounts the wooden face. The raffia cloth suggests that this is an earlier example; raffia generally is thought to predate the use of cotton to conceal the armature. Resin was applied to the raffia and then painted in colorful geometric designs. The central spire on the fabricated portion of the coiffure commonly features a pompon of feathers (now lost). These coiffures appear to derive from traditional head pieces and hair styles formerly worn by Yaka notables. Once brightly painted, the mask still displays traces of its original polychromy. The refinement of the mask and the coiffure, and the balance of the complex composition testify of the archaicity of the present mask.





Left: A Yaka mask with similar dental mutilation, collected by Hans Himmelheber in 1938-1939. Collection Museum Rietberg, Zurich, Switzerland (HH.29).



Right: The only other known Yaka mask with horns. Private Collection. Published in: Tribal Art Magazine, #44, Spring 2007, p. 171 (Adv. Moncada, Lisbon).

Opposite page: Yaka initiates, photographed by R.J. Van Doorslaer. Published in: Plancquaert (Michel), "Les Sociétés Secrètes chez les Bayaka", Louvain: Imprimerie J. Kuyl-Otto, 1930, #38.



Yaka initiates with different types of *ndeemba* masks.
Published in: Chauvet (Stephen), "Musique et Chants
Nègres", in: Visages du Monde, #4, 15 April 1933, p. 81.



SICKNESS MASK

Anonymous Ibibio artist
Nigeria, Early 20th century
Wood, pigments. 38 x 16 x 13 cm

Provenance

Serge Trullu Collection, Nîmes, France
Alfred Weisenegger Collection, Winklarn, Austria
Private collection, Austria, 2021
Zemanek-Münster, Würzburg, 6 Nov 2021, Lot 225
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2021





Ekpe (Egbo) Runner Uzuakoli with a similar sickness mask. Photography by G.I. Jones in the village of Uzuakoli, 1930s.

Among Nigeria's Ibibio peoples, unsettling face masks were designed to instill fear among the population. They were used by the Ekpo society, a crucial instrument in the hands of the village chiefs that acted as an agent of social control in the absence of a centralized, political state. The duties of this society were to propitiate the ancestors for the welfare of the group, to uphold the authority of the elders, and to maintain order in the village. The enforcement of the rules and regulations affecting every aspect of day-to-day life were given powerful spiritual sanctity through the appearance of the ancestors through wooden face masks. A mask depicting a face ravaged by disfiguring tropical diseases horrified the public, striking them with terror, and proved a most efficient means to instill fear and respect for the Ekpo society.

Ekpo, a person's soul, either transmigrated to the underworld at death to await reincarnation or to become an evil ghost. Ghosts (ekpo onyon) were the souls of the dead that could not enter the underworld and were doomed to travel the earth forever, homeless, and alone. Such a destiny depended on the person's earthly activities. For example, if a person was found guilty of a serious crime against the community, he would have been killed and his body thrown into the 'bad bush' where ghosts were believed

to reside. If a person developed a terrible disfigurement, such as leprosy, smallpox, or gangosa, this would be considered to be divine retribution, in which case, at death, likewise, the body would be thrown into the so-called bad bush.

In Ibibio culture it was said that a doer of evil deeds would become an evil ghost (idiok ekpo). Every village had an Ekpo lodge, where all the society's regalia, such as its wooden masks, were kept. Each community also had a sacred forest where the ekpo spirits were said to roam. Once a year, at the end of the harvest season, ekpo masks appeared for a period of about three weeks. The masqueraders accompanied the villagers singing and parading throughout the village. Each town had a number of open areas, focal points in the compounds of the main families, which were visited by the ekpo masquerades to pay their respects and perform. Women, children, and non-initiates were excluded from these performances.

Additionally, on the first and last days of the harvest season a public performance took place at the most important marketplace. At this occasion, everyone was allowed to witness the dances. Once the idiok ekpo had arrived, the family leader drew a circle in the sand. Each new masquerader that came near the spot, was lured into the

circle before performing – this was to invoke the spirits in the underworld to witness and guide the performance. The idiok ekpo masquerades queued up to perform, one after the other, before joining their fellow members.

Eventually the entire group appeared, buzzing around the arena like angry wasps, lunging unpredictably into the crowds, and occasionally fighting each other, jumping, running, swirling with vivacious energy. The Ibibio recognized that once a mbop (mask) was put on, an ancestor's soul (ekpo) possessed the wearer, so that the masquerader could commit any type of havoc without anybody questioning his actions.

The styles of ekpo masquerade costumes and performances varied greatly from village to village. However, throughout the region the overall color for the idiok ekpo ("evil souls") masks and costumes is black, to represent the fact that ghosts come out at nighttime. The masks had to be frightening in order to invoke the threat of force and authority necessary for the ekpo society to maintain order. This face mask portrays a victim of a particular variant of the disease gangosa, which the Ibibio call ibuo-akwanga or "twisted-

nose". Gangosa resulted from a severe vitamin deficiency which destroyed the membranes of the nose. Its depiction was a reminder of the diseases sent as punishment to particularly evil lawbreakers. The distorted, deformed, and exaggerated features of this type of masks inspired many artists. The British sculptor Henry Moore owned a very similar mask (Sotheby's, New York, "Henry Moore Artist and Collector", 14 May 1997, lot 333).

The British colonial officer G. I. Jones photographed a very similar mask worn by an Anang Ibibio ekpo dancer in the village of Uzuakoli in the 1930s. Several other masks from this workshop are known: one formerly in the prestigious James Hooper collection (Christie's, London, 14 July 1976, lot 72), another formerly in the Ratner collection (Drewal (Henry J.), "Traditional Art of the Nigerian Peoples", Washington, D.C., 1977, p. 45, #44), one sold at Sotheby's in 1990 (Sotheby's, New York, 21 April 1990, lot 262). Other similar masks with a crooked nose are in the collection of the Antwerp Ethnographic Museum (AE.1959.0055.0037), Parisian Musée du quai Branly (73.1989.3.1), and Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco (#1979-03-06).





Masked Members of the Ekpo Society. Published in M'Keown, Robert L., "Twenty-Five Years in Qua Iboe: The Story of a Missionary Effort in Nigeria", 1912, fig. 65.

FACE MASK

Anonymous Makonde artist
Mozambique, Early 20th century
Wood, pigments, hair. 26 x 20 x 12 cm

Provenance

Collected by Olivier Klejman
Pierre Langlois, France
Merton Simpson, New York, USA
Allan Stone Collection, New York, USA
Private Collection, Germany
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2021





This unique Makonde face mask in all likelihood represents a very old man. A small number of deformity and sickness masks are known among the Makonde, many fitting into genres or depicting specific character types. Nijale masks (often with with big ears) were originally created to depict the elderly and often showed sunken, hollowed-out faces. Likewise, a mask type that emerged in the 1950s depicted a hunter with a swollen and inflamed eye (due to a hunting accident), while others with twisted features and large toothy mouths may depict witches (personal communication with Alexander Bortolot, 2022). The deformed nature of the face is strengthened by the wear the mask suffered to the nose and forehead. Characteristically for Makonde masks, the coiffure is made of real human hair, as is its moustache. Notwithstanding the sunken planes throughout the face, this exceptional face mask is carved so realistically it almost feels like a portrait.

FACE MASK

Anonymous We artist
Ivory Coast, Early 20th century
Wood, metal, hair. 33 x 17 x 15 cm

Provenance
Private Collection, Belgium







AMULET

Anonymous Dogon artist
Mali, 19th century or earlier
Metal. 5 cm

Provenance
Emmanuel Ameloot, Ghent, Belgium, 2023
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023

In 1907, Louis Desplagnes wrote of the 'astonishing perfection' of Dogon blacksmiths, calling the specialists who made copper ornaments like this figure pendant by the lost-wax process 'especially expert and delicate workers' ("Le Plateau central nigérien", Paris, Pp. 367-369). Unfortunately, he and subsequent authors provided little information about the origin of copper and its smiths among the Dogon. There is no geological or archeological evidence for copper mining in the Dogon area, although copper has been traded and worked into ornaments there for centuries. The Dogon may have obtained the metal through the trans-Saharan trade networks that brought copper from Spain, North African, and the Sahara to commercial centers of the Sahel and the Sudan. This pendant in the form of a seated figure has a smooth surface and sinuous limbs – just as an example in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art given to them by Lester Wunderman (inv. 1977.394.30). Descriptions of the regalia worn by the hogon, a village's spiritual leader, sometimes include copper alloy rings, bracelets, and amulets, and Dogon women are also said to have worn such amulets. It perhaps was once associated with Nommo, the mythical being who was said to embody this luminous material and in Dogon thought represents order, purity, fertility, and life.





HEAD

Anonymous Bura artist
Niger, 15th century or earlier
Terracotta. 22,5 cm

Provenance
Private collection, Ottawa, Canada, 1992
Jacques Germain, Montreal, Canada, 2004-2006
Private Collection, Amsterdam

Publication
Germain (Jacques), "Arts Anciens de l'Afrique Noire",
Montreal, 2004, p. 11

This beautiful head is a rare witness of the funerary sculpture of the Bura civilization in present Niger. Once positioned on top of cylindrical vessel, the refined facial details and sensitivity of this head place it among the masterpieces of the art from this lost culture. From the first millennium, Africa's western Sahel - a vast region just south of the Sahara Desert that spans what is today Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger - was a cradle of civilizations that flourished as a nexus of global exchange with the development of the trans-Saharan trade routes. Home to the legendary empires of Ghana (300–1200), Mali (1230–1600), Songhay (1464–1591) and Segu (1712–1860), the succession of states—which in some cases covered a territory as vast as Western Europe—dawned, flourished and receded over the course of a thousand years. Their larger-than-life reputations have been the subject of an extensive body of literature by historians yet remain highly abstract in our visual imagination. This is partly because the region's enormously rich material culture has largely fallen outside of historical and artistic frames of reference. In 2020, Alisa Lagamma, curator of African art at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art corrected this injustice with her trailblazing

exhibition "Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara". This show examined this important and relatively unfamiliar artistic legacy, including a group of terracotta heads from the same cultural realm as the present, now known as Bura. Bura is an archeological site in southwest Niger located along the Niger River, bordering Mali. A hunter's chance discovery in 1975 of two terracotta heads led a team from Niger's University of Niamey to conduct further archaeological research, uncovering a necropolis at Bura-Asinda-Sikka in 1983 with more than six hundred overturned ceramic urns dating from 300 to 1700. Some of these urns contained human remains, while others had remains buried underneath. The Bura funerary vessels are generally ovoid and tubular in shape, and some are surmounted by figures or heads such as the present. Following the 1975 discovery and 1983 excavation of the Bura archeological site, and after a Bura-Asinda exhibition toured France in the 1990s, the ancient Bura terracotta statuettes became highly valued by collectors. The anthropomorphic heads of the ancient and medieval Bura culture have been sought for their unusual abstraction and simplification, the present among its most accomplished examples.





Installation view with group of Bura artworks at "Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2020. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



HIPPOPOTAMUS

Anonymous Sao artist
Chad, 16th century or earlier
Terracotta. 9,5 cm

Provenance

Collected by Christine Liehman in Chad during the 1960s-1970s
Yannick de Hondt, Bruges, Belgium, ca. 1998-2023
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023







This wonderful abstract rendering of a hippopotamus originates from the so-called Sao Civilization, which developed over a millennium at the south-western shores of Lake Chad. The very term 'Sao' indicates the vagueness of our knowledge of this enigmatic culture, meaning in a pejorative Moslem usage 'pagans'. While migrants from the north settled in Chad from the 5th century onwards, the great epoch of Sao culture, characterized by walled cities and elaborate funerary rites, was from the 10th to the 16th centuries. From this time date the many thousands of mostly ceramic objects that have yet to be coherently interpreted. Despite extensive archaeological research, especially by Marcel Griaule and Jean-Paul Lebeuf, details about the rise and fall of this culture remain unknown. Cultures who succeeded the Sao, such as the Kotoko, appropriated some of their artistic traditions and propagated legends about these powerful predecessors. Most known artworks have been found in dwelling, ritual, and funerary sites, as well as in areas identified as metallurgic workshops. Clay, iron,

and copper were the media of choice for the Sao. They created animal and human figurines imbued with protective properties, and personal adornments such as rings, bracelets, and pendants. Over a period of several decades the French couple Jean-Paul Lebeuf (1907-1994) and Annie Masson-Detourbet (1921-1995) did extensive archeological research in the region; resulting in one of the few publications on the material culture of this region: "L'art des Sao" (Paris, 1977). Daughter to the French ambassador to Chad, Christine Liehman befriended the Lebeuf couple and build an important collection of Sao terracotta artworks over the years, the present hippopotamus being one of the masterpieces of the group. Too little is known about this culture to speculate about its significance, so we are left to enjoy its wonderful timeless abstraction. Characteristically Sao, the eyes are made from impressed pellets of clay, while the hippopotamus in his example is reduced to its essential shape; its head and snout projected upwards the sky.

CONTAINER (KUDUO)

Anonymous Akan artist
Ghana, 16th - 17th century
Copper Alloy. 28,5 cm

Provenance

Abdoulay Ousmane, Lomé, Togo, 2000
Guy van Rijn collection, Brussels, Belgium 2000-2023



Ornate, cast brass vessels known as *kuduo* were the possessions of kings and courtiers in the Akan kingdoms of Ghana and Ivory Coast. Gold dust and nuggets were kept in *kuduo*, as were other items of personal value and significance. As receptacles for their owners' kra, or life force, they were prominent features of ceremonies designed to honor and protect that individual. At the time of his death, a person's *kuduo* was filled with gold and other offerings and included in an assembly of items left at the burial site. The greenish patina of the present container indicates it spent a long time in the ground, accompanying its former owner in the afterlife. The elaborate form and complex iconography of this *kuduo* reveal the broad range of aesthetic traditions from which the Akan peoples have drawn to create their courtly arts. Goods from Europe and North Africa, received in exchange for Akan gold, textiles, and slaves, included vessels that may have partly inspired the design of this and other *kuduo*. The repeating bands of geometric patterns

incised into the surface, as well as the shape of the vessel may reflect Islamic influences. A latch mechanism on the exterior signals the value of the materials kept within and alludes to the vessel's symbolic function of keeping its owner's kra secure. On top we find an exquisite representation of an elephant and a hunter. Only a single other *kuduo* with this iconography is known, formerly in the collection of the British artist Tom Phillips and published on the front cover of his book on Akan goldweights. The British Museum owns a *kuduo* with the lid crowned by an elephant, its tail equally forming a fan (Af1956,27.42).

The elephant was both unpredictably dangerous – spiritually as well as physically – and the largest single source of animal food in Akan forests. This made elephant hunting a perilous venture. Furthermore, the Akan had the intrinsic belief that just like mankind, some animals, including the elephant, had spirits which survived the death of the animal. Hunters classified

wild animals into two: those with spirit (sasammoa) and those without (mmoa). The former were deemed to have malevolent spirits which lived on after the animal had been killed by a hunter, and which could haunt its killer and cause calamity to befall him during subsequent hunting expeditions. Uniquely among these animals, the killing of the elephant reportedly brought honor to the hunter; for this reason, and despite the inherent risks, some hunters targeted the elephant, while others avoided it. Clearly, the elephant enjoyed special status among animals with spirit (sasammoa), because it was considered as the king of the jungle. This is illustrated by Akan proverbs such as 'Gsono akyiri nni aboa' ('there is no wild animal besides elephant'), 'wodi Gsono akyiri a hasuo nka wo' ('if you follow the trail of elephant you would not be drenched by dew'). The powerful elephant was hence chosen as emblem by many paramount chiefs. Denkyira for example was once a powerful state in the forest belt and, until 1701, was the

super power in the region; its subjects included Asante, Wassa, Sehwi, Twifo, Aowin and Adanse. Not surprisingly, Denkyira adopted the elephant, 'the king of all animals', as its totem. Besides its cultural role, the elephant had economic importance as well. Firstly, it was hunted for its tusk and meat which were of high economic value. Ivory was a highly prized object of trade whilst elephant flesh was an abundant source of food. The peoples of Gold Coast in medieval times developed commercial ties with the peoples of Western Sudan. Two caravan trade routes were developed to link the commercial empires of Western Sudan with the savannah and forest belts of Ghana. The ivory trade was mainly associated with rulers; this was because, by custom, part of the ivory obtained had to be given to the ruler, who used some for ornamental purposes and sold the rest for his upkeep. The presence of an elephant hunter on a prestigious container as a *kuduo* thus shouldn't come as a surprise in a class-conscious society as the Akan.



GOLDWEIGHT, COUPLE

Anonymous Akan artist
Ghana, 17th - 18th century
Copper Alloy. 5,3 cm

Provenance

Maître George Loiseau (†1994) Collection,
Abidjan, Ivory Coast, before 1960
By descent through the family
Galerie Charles-Wesley Hourdé, Paris, France, 2009
Guy van Rijn collection, Brussels, Belgium 2009-2023

Publication

Hourdé (Charles-Wesley), "Une collection particulière valant son
pesant d'or", Paris: Charles-Wesley Hourdé, 2009, #114.

Exhibition

"Une collection particulière valant son pesant d'or", Charles-Wesley
Hourdé, Paris, 9 December 2009-31 January 2010





Over six hundred years ago the Akan started to make brass weights for weighing gold dust, the currency of their region of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Eventually they produced the most complete three dimensional inventory of any culture in history. Virtually every animal, bird, fish, or object known to them became the subject of a miniature sculpture. Human figures are represented in the activities of everyday life and sacred or courtly rituals, together with pioneer casts from nature and a wealth of abstract and ornamental designs.

In 2010, the English artist Tom Phillips published a beautiful book on his comprehensive collection of Akan goldweights, which took him thirty years to build up. He writes the following about the depiction of couples: "Relations between men and women are sparsely referred to with the notable exception

of the act of copulation, although that itself is rare enough subject in the goldweight repertoire. I have only seen five or six authentic examples of which I own three which were collected by Timothy Garrard. Such a primal event might have generated a thousand utterances of a proverbial kind though none has been recorded. Once the faking of goldweights began in earnest this subject was a natural contender for popularity and many recent portrayals are to be found. [pp. 123-125]. The stick-like bodies, asymmetric hairstyles and oversized rounded heads are typical for early goldweights and place this rare example in the eighteenth century or even earlier. In an article on 'Erotic Akan Goldweights' (African Arts, Vol. 15, No. 2, Feb. 1982, p. 60) concurs this rarity, stating he has only seen 4 of the type among the circa 120,00 goldweights he estimates to have seen over the years.



COUPLE

Anonymous Lobi artist,
the "Master of the heart-shaped face"
Burkina Faso, Mid 20th century
Wood. 16,5 cm

Provenance
Private Collection, Germany
Private Collection, Ghent, Belgium, 2023

In Burkina Faso, Lobi sculptors create male and female figural couples for use by professional diviners and for domestic shrines. In Lobi society, immaterial spiritual divinities, called *thila*, are responsible for overseeing a community's well-being. In their efforts to maintain political, social, and moral order and provide protection against witchcraft and sorcery, *thila* communicate through diviners they have selected as intermediaries. When an individual consults a diviner concerning misfortunes inflicted by spirits, *thila* may direct that a shrine figure be carved as part of the remedy and provide the formal requirements for its appearance. The sculptural works created for residential or public shrines may suggest a physical form for the *thila*. Known as *bateba*, they afford

an extended family a protective line of defense, preventing the entrance of evil into a household. The Lobi couples that serve diviners in their practice are relatively small. While most couples are carved separately, the bodies of a handful examples are joined at the torso. In a loving gesture the male statue holds his arm around his wife. Both man and woman are portrayed in the same style, with an equal height. Man and woman are united to keep harmful forces at bay. The Mead Art Museum at Amherst College owns a Lobi couple sculpted by the same artist (#AC.1999.63). The German Lobi collector Stephan Herkenhoff has identified 21 statues from this hand, and given the artist the nickname the "Master of the heart-shaped face".



Mead Museum (AC.1999.63)





CALABASH WITH STOPPER

Anonymous Pende artist
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
Wood, fibers, calabash, metal. 28 cm

Provenance
Colonial collection, Belgium
Emmanuel Ameloot, Ghent, Belgium
Rob Temple, Ghent, Belgium
Pascal Vernimmen, Ghent, Belgium
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023





While a few wooden figurative stoppers from the Pende are known, none of those still has its original gourd attached. In the literature these have been described as the medicine gourds used by diviners, but it is likely they could also serve a more private secular use. A metal hook attached to the fiber cords allowed for it to hung to a wall to protect its contents from rodents. The delicate wooden anthropomorphic stopper is characterized by the beautiful stylization of the human face and crowned with a magnificent coiffure. As the big eye sockets miss pupils, giving the face an intense, enigmatic gaze. A large protruding Adam's apple's clearly identify the head as male. While the type is generally attributed to the Pende culture, the style of the head could also point to a Mbala origin. As the calabash, the stopper has a beautiful deep patina, indicating its old age and long period of use. While it has never been published before, it can be considered as one of the most beautiful examples of its type.

HEADREST

Anonymous Ngombe artist
D.R. Congo, Early 20th century
Wood. 16 cm

Provenance

Colonial collection, Belgium
Emmanuel Ameloot, Ghent, Belgium
Rob Temple, Ghent, Belgium
Pascal Vernimmen, Ghent, Belgium
Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium, 2023





While non-figurative headrests are common in Eastern and Southern Africa, Congolese examples generally include anthropomorphic or zoomorphic caryatids. In D.R. Congo especially the Kuba and Luba peoples sculpted non-figurative headrests, yet it are the headrests of the Ngombe that can easily compete with the most virtuous examples from elsewhere on the continent. Seen their rarity, a lot of confusion about the origin of this style lingers on in the literature. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts lists their example as 'Luba' on their website (97.168.1), while Claude-Henri Pirat in his magnum opus on African headrests attributes the type to the Mongo ("Sur la Piste de l'Eléphant", 2021, p. 218). Anitra Nettleton in 2007 nonetheless identified the origin of these headrests as Ngombe in her must-read book on the subject 'African Dream Machines' (p. 176, no. 152), citing an example in the Tervuren museum coming from the

Ubangi region (#17200).

With a tradition dating back to Egyptian antiquity, these wooden pillows were meant to elevate their owner's head from the ground during sleep. Ergonomically, they aligned the spine, yet their main function was to protect intricate hairstyles from dust or being flattened. Elaborate coiffures, which could take hours to create, were more than elements of beautification: they indicated their wearer's social status and were often important identity markers. Through their use, these headrests related to the world of dreams and were sometimes imbued with benign powers that protected their slumbering owner. Sleepers would usually lie on their side with the neck or the cheek rested on the curved support. Over time, they acquired a lush worn patina due to their intense daily use. As every culture created their own model of headrest, these have been long collected by aficionados for their ingenious and elegant designs.



National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh A.1938.34



Collection Minneapolis Museum of Art 97.168.1



HEADREST

Anonymous Mfinu artist
D.R. Congo, Late 19th century
Wood, metal. 16 cm

Provenance
Colonial collection, Belgium
Peter Biesmans, Bilzen, Belgium



Only one other headrest of this type is known, it was auction in Dijon in 2016 (Sadde, 2 June 2016, lot 155), where it was sold for more than 50 times its low estimate, signaling its exceptional nature. A few later the present headrest was discovered by its current owner, an important art-historical event seen the rarity of the type. 'The type in fact is very similar to a group of Mfinu headrests of a more angular nature – the most emblematic of them having become the logo of the Dapper Foundation (previously the Musée Dapper in Paris). Five such headrests are known, one in the Brooklyn Museum (22.811), the Dapper example (0926), an example in the Tervuren Museum, one in the Willy Mestach collection, and a last one privately owned and sold at Binoche & Giquello in Paris in 2016 (10 May 2016, lot 47). The middle section

of these headrest similarly has a most anthropomorphic feeling, with stylized arms and legs connecting the top with the bottom. These headrests have a central support column, connecting the top with the base, opposed to the present where two lateral columns form the actual structural support of the rest. Christiane Falgayrettes, writing about the example in the Dapper Foundation: "Headrests sometimes contain pure lines that seem to emerge from the depths of human memory, revealing mankind's body in its earliest fullness. Its image appears fleetingly or is barely sketched out, like in Shona and Mfinu works; the composition is simple, with geometric planes and the elimination of all superfluous detail leading to the synthesis of elements that are the visual basis of the metaphor. Few sculptors have been able to achieve, as in these works, such a degree of stylization without sacrificing the vitality in the general structure". ('Supports de rêves', Paris, 1989, p. 55) Marc Leo Felix has pointed out that a few Teke groups lived among the Mfinu, which could indicate that this type of work, with its strong Teke influence, was sculpted by one of their members ('100 peoples of Zaire and their sculpture', 1987, p. 113).



Sadde, Dijon, "Civilisations", 2 June 2016. Lot 155





Duende Art Projects' ambition is to inspire people and enrich their lives by sharing our profound passion for the art of the African continent. Our purpose is to strengthen Africa's visibility and significance within the global and diverse art world through a strong digital presence and curated exhibitions on unique locations.

Duende is a Spanish word that is difficult to translate; it is a concept related to flamenco, referring to a magical moment of inspiration and

genius. It is the heightened state of emotion when encountering a moving work of art, a sudden experience that can't be captured, a moment of goosebumps. While Spanish in origin, the word has an African ring to it – indeed it is a universal concept, and indicative of the gallery's ambitions. Duende Art Projects goes beyond labels and reveals the art's multiplicity of layers.

The gallery wants to open up the western-dominated perspective in the

art world, and offers a well-rounded and fresh take on African art, both classical and contemporary. Establishing strategic collaborations with other galleries and institutions worldwide, it wishes to create opportunities to support and promote art and artists from the African continent. The gallery strives to advance the careers of the artists it exhibits and strengthen their international exposure.

Our mission is to connect people — the curious and interested, aspiring and seasoned collectors, connoisseurs, emerging and renowned artists, art advisors, curators and writers — with art from the African continent and its diaspora. We facilitate easy access through compelling exhibitions — offline and online, in Antwerp and on location. Our online platform provides insightful educational content and wishes to be a home for ideas, news and stories. We offer a bespoke and discrete art advisory service that covers all aspects of building and managing a collection.

Duende Art Projects was founded in 2021 by Bruno Claessens, a passionate art expert with 15 years of ample experience in the African art market. Previously, he was the European director of the African art department at Christie's for 5 years. Bruno has



published three books on African art (Ere Ibeji (2013), Baule Monkeys (2016) & UNÛ (2021)) and has ran a popular blog on the subject since 2013. Throughout his career, he gained a profound knowledge of art of the African continent, both classical and contemporary, and has developed a great network of collectors, curators and scholars as well as strong institutional ties.

Duende Art Projects' values are more than just words. We live our values and believe that galleries with a strong culture and a higher goal do better. Our values are to be genuine, personal, responsible and open-minded. We pursue growth and learning, embrace and drive change through innovation, are passionate and determined, and aim to create both inspirational as joyous moments.



List of Exhibitions | Duende Art Projects

- 2023 [Alliances](#) by Hadassa Ngamba, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2023 [Transient Beings](#), Contemporary African art and the human form, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2023 [Je ne sais quoi](#), African art with a surreal twist, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2023 [A World Unheard](#) by Raymond Fuyana, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2023 [The Blind Side](#) by Sibusiso Ngwazi, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2023 [Manifestations](#), Unravelling five antique African sculptures, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2023 [Pathfinder](#) by Mostaff Muchawaya, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2022 [Living with Art](#), Duende Magazine, online exhibition
- 2022 [Van Strien Collection](#), PAN, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 2022 [Sweet Dreams](#), Parcours des Mondes, Paris, France
- 2022 [Unsettled](#), Zwartzusters Monastery, Antwerp, Belgium
- 2021 [Threads](#), Zwartzusters Monastery, Antwerp, Belgium



Parcours des Mondes
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